See last page for limitations of the statistics used.



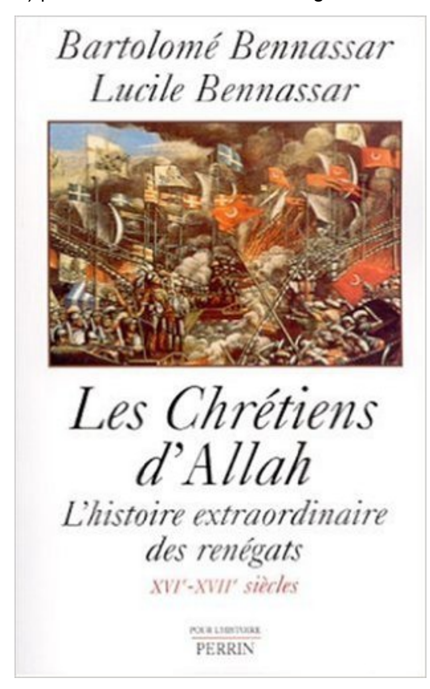
READING , SIGNS AND SCENES

THE CHRISTIANS OF ALLAH. THE EXTRAORDINARY HISTORY OF THE RENEGADES (16TH-17TH CENTURIES)

MARCH 1, 2016 | ISABELLE POUTRIN | LEAVE A COMMENT

In 1617, Juan Roldelgas, a peasant from Castile, enlisted in the Spanish fleet. Captured at sea with 456 other soldiers by ships "of Turks and Moors", he is sold to Algiers. After three years of slavery and a failed escape attempt, he renounces Christianity in the hope of obtaining his emancipation, in vain. Having gained the confidence of his master, he became a privateer on the ships of Algiers and, during a stopover in the

Canaries, managed to escape during a water chore, went to the Spaniards. But, recognized as a renegade by former Christian captives, he was referred to the Holy Inquisition who handed down his sentence on December 22, 1622: Rodelgas was condemned to an abjuration *of levi* , that is to say a *slight*suspicion of heresy. After a few months of religious instruction, he can return to Spain, free and forgiven for having been a Muslim for some time [1] . This "exemplary" story opens *The Christians of Allah* , published in 1989. This book has practically opened up the field of studies on renegades; it remains mandatory reading for anyone interested in conversions to Islam, as two speakers at the symposium "Reporting on conversions to Islam" recently noted, Loïc Le Pape [2] and Stefano Allievi [3] . Their presentations encouraged me to write this text and feed the conclusions.



Bartolomé and Lucile Bennassar, The Christians of Allah. The extraordinary history of the renegades, XVI-XVII centuries, Paris, Perrin, 1989 (paperback: Perrin, coll. "Tempus", 2006).

Bartolomé and Lucile Bennassar, after diving into the archives of the Inquisitions of Spain, Portugal and Venice, identified 1,550 renegades, which hardly represents, they estimate, 0.5% of the renegades of the period 1550-1770. From this sample, they offer a picture that is both striking and nuanced of a phenomenon that remained very little known when the book was published: that of the apostasy of thousands of Christians in the context of the confrontation between the 'Ottoman Empire at the time of its splendor, and the Christian states of Western Europe. Besides linear paths like that of Juan Rodelgas, there are also complicated, often tragic life stories, stories of destinies crushed by captivity and the galleys, of repeated denials, torn conversions followed by deep integrations in Islam , or voluntary returns to a Christian country for which conversion to Islam was only a necessary step. The figures obtained from the 1,550 cases found in the archives are indicative of broad trends.*The Christians of Allah* thus provided a solid basis, but also a powerful stimulus for research on captivity and conversion in the Mediterranean [4] .



Johannes Lingelbach (v1622-1674), naval combat against the Turks (Lepanto?)
Private collection

The war between Christian states and the Ottoman Empire

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Algiers and Tunis, dependencies of the Ottoman Empire, lived from the *corso.* ~~racing war~~. Salé in Morocco, and other North African ports like Bizerte also practiced this form of maritime warfare, which was also rampant on the part of Christian states against Muslims. Muslim corsairs seized ships (Spanish, Italian, French or English) with rich cargoes, loaded with passengers and soldiers; they went to raid peasants and fishermen on the coasts, from Calabria to Portugal and especially in Corsica, but also in the Atlantic (thus in Lanzarote in the Canaries, in 1618: 900 prisoners on an island of 3000 to 4000 inhabitants). The individuals thus captured could be released for ransom, either immediately after their capture, or after a more or less long stay in Muslim countries. In the Christian countries a whole system had been instituted for the collection of funds, the negotiation of prices and the redemption of captives in North Africa. Nobles and religious were fairly systematically bought up, and there were few renegades among them. On the other hand, a large number of captives were never redeemed: they were sold as slaves and ended their lives in the land of Islam. This is the case, in particular, for women, rarer among captives, rarer still to return to the country. Algiers thus counted thousands of captive Christians but also renegades of all origins, who, with the Turks sent by the sultan, held power and commanded most of the corsair ships. negotiating prices and buying back captives in North Africa. Nobles and religious were fairly systematically bought up, and there were few renegades among them. On the other hand, a large number of captives were never redeemed: they were sold as slaves and ended their lives in the land of Islam. This is the case, in particular, for women, rarer among captives, rarer still to return to the country. Algiers thus counted thousands of captive Christians but

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The quantitative study which occupies the second part of the book shows the extension of the danger zone on the maritime border between Christian countries and Islamic countries. Seafarers and coastal populations were the most exposed, especially in the black zone between Sicily and Mallorca, but the "mores" ships also operated in the colder Atlantic waters, as far as the outskirts of Saint-Malo and of Newfoundland so that the history of the renegades concerns a large part of the European countries of the time [5] . B. and L. Bennassar also include in their study the individuals raided on the margins of the Ottoman Empire by the Tartars (and some of whom ended up before the Inquisition) as well as the victims of the *devchirme*, these levies of young people practiced by the Ottomans in Greece and the Balkans to procure elite soldiers (the Janissaries) and administrative and domestic staff.

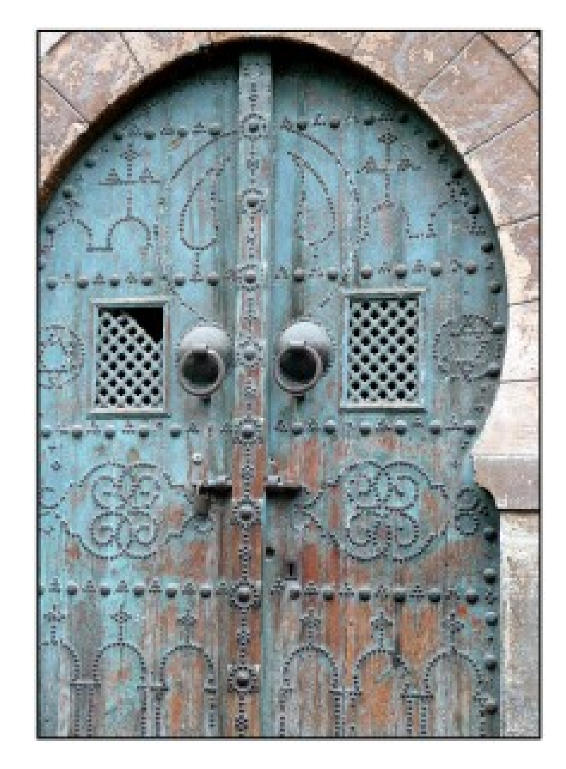
If "the ways of Islam [6] Appear very varied, the authors distinguish a few main routes. Catches at sea, from Newfoundland to the Strait of Hormuz, provide about half of the renegades. What about the other half? Raids on land provide captives by the hundreds. The deserters form another contingent (94 men of the sample), in particular the soldiers of the Spanish presidencies of Oran who, forgotten by the metropolis, pass on the Muslim side in the hope of returning more easily to the country. The voluntary passages to Islam (71 individuals, 23 of whom then return to a Christian country voluntarily) concern slaves originating in Africa or Eastern Europe, but also men in rupture, eager to flee their country for multiple reasons (debts, convictions); others stopped in a port (Algiers or other) and, after a fight with a "Turk", or to follow a woman, became Muslims. Among these volunteers, 11 Catholic religious whose apostasy is motivated by the desire for a freer life, adventure and women, "but never, it seems, the slightest theological concern"[7] .

In this collection of archives, women are the exception [8]: 59 women out of 1,550 cases, or 3.80%. Being neither soldiers nor sailors, they are less exposed to capture at sea, on the other hand they have been kidnapped on land, sometimes under the eyes of their families, on the coasts of Corsica or

southern Italy. 23 Russian, Hungarian and Romanian women were abducted during raids on their village and, for the most part, sold on the slave market in Constantinople. The low place of women is also explained by the fact that they have, much less often than men, the opportunity to be redeemed or to flee and return to a Christian country. The book is therefore scant on this point; however, focusing on the specific case of women when gender studies in the 1980s were not yet very developed, B. and L. Bennassar indicated an important track [9] .

Child Conversions

In this very diverse panorama, they spot a constant: "the omnipresence of children and adolescents from all European countries, who have become Muslims in spite of themselves" [10] . Of the 978 individuals in the sample who told the Inquisitors the age of their arrival in a Muslim country, 55% were under the age of 15, 78% were under the age of 20.



Blue door, Tunis. Photo by abac077 on Flickr, 2009.

The proportion of children under 15 is higher for those from Eastern Europe (73% of captives) due to the practice of *devchirme*, which *mainly* concerns boys from 4 to 10 years old [11] . In Western Europe, about 50% of captives were taken before the age of 15, often, moreover, at work: sons of fishermen or sailors, mosses, cooks, soldiers or soldiers' valets, children are engaged very young in working life and exposed to risks. Privateers filter their prisoners, easily freeing the adults for ransom, but keeping the children to convert them. B. and L. Bennassar see in these captures one aspect of the war:"Operation of good policy: multiply Muslims by a regular levy at the expense of the living forces of the Christian world by relieving him of a few thousand of his children to whom was offered, naturally, over the years, the possibility of *full* integration into the cosmopolitan societies of the Maghreb or the Ottoman Empire [12] ".

For these children, the conversion was generally expeditious and marked by violence. Those who are taken at sea or on the coasts are circumcised without delay, on the boat itself, without ceremony - and particularly the French (62 boys under the age of 15, or 57% of the total of the French, and almost all captured at sea [13]) because of the agreements made between France and the Sublime Porte, which provide for prisoner exchanges: having become a Muslim, the child can no longer be claimed by France. But thereafter, most of these converts remain in the country of Islam until adulthood and many of them become convinced Muslims: hence the high proportion, in this part of the sample constituted by B. and L. Bennassar, men who returned to the Christian country against their will. The typical scenario, in this case, is that of the integrated convert, who takes to the sea for privateer expeditions against the

Christians and who, by a reversal of the situation, is captured, identified as a renegade and brought before the Inquisition. He must then justify his apostasy by telling the Inquisitors the circumstances of it.



Andrea Vicentino, Battle of Lepanto (detail) 1603, Venice, Doge's Palace

The procedure for conversion to Islam

For these renegades, the transition from Christianity to Islam is never a matter of conviction, nor the consequence of indoctrination. Two scenarios emerge, depending on whether the individuals are captives or free men. The captives were not systematically converted by force: some even resisted for years the requests which were made to them to convert, and in spite of their harsh condition of oarsmen on the corsair galleys. It then took a trigger to push them to take the step voluntarily, for example the failure of a takeover operation, or the realization that their families had not taken the necessary steps to buy them back. But for the children, the conversion was undeniably suffered, as a result of ill-treatment or even real torture. The masters who bought them wanted to take away all hope of their return. Whether they were children or adults, the captives were converted without ceremony, in a private setting (at the master's home), and the presence of a cadi (judge) is exceptional. On the other hand, when it was free men who voluntarily switched to Islam - this is the case of deserters for example, or religious in breach of vows - the ceremony was public: horse riding in the streets, procession, feast, general joy mark the welcome of the neo-Muslim [14] . In this case, in fact, it was no longer a question of forced affiliations but of duly consented conversions, even if some were followed by regret and an escape to Christian countries.

The process of conversion to Islam is marked by the recitation of *shahadâ* , the profession of Islamic faith [15] . 812 men out of 910 (89%) confess that they raised their index finger with their right hand, saying "the usual words", and many memorized the formula " *La illah illa Allah Mohammed rezul Allah* ("There is no God but God and Muhammad is his messenger"). One sentence and one gesture, therefore, was enough to cross the religious barrier. But many also say that they ignore the meaning of the formula, and others give the Inquisitors more or less fanciful translations such as: "God is and will be and Muhammad is his secretary" (according to a Portuguese renegade), "God is alone and there is no saint or mother of God "(a Frenchman, converted at 13), even more syncretic interpretations such as" I believe in God and in Muhammad who sits at the right of God "(a Spaniard) or "Mahomet is son of Our Lord" (a Genoese, very young at the time of his capture) [16]. Without prior instruction in Islam, and often very young, therefore little aware of Christian theology, the renegades project a disparate set of beliefs onto the *shahadâ* . Voluntary conversions are often accompanied by the reading of the Koran, but it is obvious that indoctrination of future converts is not the main concern of Muslims.



Tintoretto, Miracle of Saint Mark liberating a slave (detail), 1548, Galleria dell'Academia, Venice (Italy)

It is extremely rare, in the stories collected by B. and L. Bennassar, that conversion is accompanied by a ritual of denial of Christianity: only six examples of sacrilegious gestures such as trampling on the Cross or spitting on it. But it is probable that the renegades did not insist, before the Inquisitors, on insisting on these gestures [17] . Affiliation to Islam, whether forced or undergone, resulted in a change in the external signs of identification: name, costume, eating habits. The convert received "Turkish clothes", had to dress "like a More" (wide breeches, narrow waistcoat worn over a white shirt) and this change of appearance was accompanied by the shaving of the head, with the exception of a wick on the top of the skull (wick called *chufo, zerro,*or *tufo)* ; a red cap or turban completed the costume. As for the names, the

most frequent are Mostafa and Mourad, or Assan, Ali, Muhammad, Yusuf, Jafer - but the name Mami, very frequent, was only worn by renegades [18] .

Of the 1,500 men studied by B. and L. Bennassar, 866 were circumcised and 115 were not (for the others, we have no information), which means that circumcision is a rite of passage to Islam of major importance* in the context studied. Those who manage to avoid it are adult men, who have stayed for a short time in the land of Islam and have been able to invoke various pretexts; but for the children, and the converts who stayed several years and got married on the spot, there was no escape from this operation. Some children were circumcised on the day of their capture: here the operation takes the place of conversion. In all cases, the loss of the foreskin creates an irreversible situation because it will be impossible, in the event of return to a Christian country, to deny the apostasy. Furthermore, the accounts describe circumcision as painful, mentioning the risk of a missed operation or a fatal hemorrhage. Several deserters, voluntarily presenting themselves for conversion, backed away from the operation and returned in haste to the Christians. Thus, despite a wide variety of circumstances, circumcision appears to be an essential marker for affiliation to Islam, which is under great pressure from Muslim society. [19] .

*13% were not circumsized; males born in the US had similar numbers from 1950 to 1990 at least and, based on this, it must be that circumcision is of major importance to being a US citizen.

Reintegration into the Church

"For the inquisitors, any Christian who practiced rites and ceremonies of the Muslim religion on a territory of Spanish sovereignty or won Islam with the intention of settling there, whether he is a Christian of origin (" old Christian ") or of another religion ("new Christian of More", for example) was liable to the justice of the Holy Office [20] ", Recall B. and L. Bennassar. It should be emphasized, a large number of renegades (impossible to quantify precisely, moreover) never returned to Christian countries. Among those in the sample collected here are forcibly converts who later became convinced Muslims, and who only returned to the Christian side due to adverse circumstances. This is the case of renegades who became privateers, who were taken by Christian ships and, often, denounced by Christian rowers from their own ship. There are also voluntary converts who only switched to Islam for a short period, out of survival strategy, while awaiting an opportunity to return home. As we can see, the range of scenarios is very wide.

The object of *The Christians of Allah* is not the study of the inquisitorial procedure applied to apostates [21] . We will find even less in this book a study of the criteria developed in canon law to judge the gravity of apostasy and to assess the extenuating circumstances of forced apostasy [22] . On the other hand, the authors clearly show the efforts of the renegades to soften the scope of their transition to Islam and the arguments they use before the Inquisitors. They put forward the coercion and violence against them, to convince their judges that they could not resist the pressures, that they had to save their lives, or that they were driven by despair - but that they denied "from the mouth and not from the heart [23] ". Hence accounts of apostasy which seem somewhat standardized, built to meet the expectations of the Inquisitors. The renegades who returned on their own initiative to a Christian

country and who spontaneously presented themselves to the Inquisitors were, in general, assured of absolution [24] .



Court door of the Inquisition Villanueva de los Infantes (Spain), photo by Rafa on Flickr, 2012. https://www.flickr.com/photos/61305266@N02/

Conversely, a certain number of renegades, who passed over to the Christian side following a combat at sea, hid their true identity and claimed to be "Turkish of the nation" and not of "Turkish by profession", that is to say Muslims by birth and not converts.*Rowed on Christian ships as Muslim captives, they hoped to be able to return to Algiers or Tunis during a next battle at sea. This fiction of a Muslim identity by birth is maintained as well by some Dutch people as by Spaniards and Italians. This suggests that it is costume, language and circumcision that are the signs of belonging to Islam, not physical traits. The cosmopolitan nature of privateer societies may explain this relative indifference to the color of the complexion and hair: [25] . It was indeed necessary to invent a Muslim genealogy to support the lie. These men who claimed to have a "Turkish" identity no longer felt Christian, underline B. and L. Bennassar. They had adopted the way of life but also, it seems, the Islamic faith, of an adhesion "of heart" [26]. This concerns around 300 men in the sample, or just under 20%. This proportion is not negligible; one can think that the integrated renegades stayed in a country of Islam and were therefore less likely to find themselves before the Inquisition: the sample probably only captures a minor trace. These converts confess to the Inquisitors "intention", that is to say that they believed they could make their salvation in Islam, that they learned the prayers, attended the mosque, observed the *zala* (daily

*"renegade" was used specifically for Christians who converted to Islam; ergo there was no Muslim renegades without redefining the word itself.

prayers), performed *guadoc* (ritual ablutions), respected Ramadan, memorized invocations such as " *Allah Akbar* " and what they call the *Basmala* (*Bismillah*) and the*Andulila* (*Al-hamdu lillah*) [27] .

For those who were brought to court following an information, the Inquisition was both extremely wary and patient. These men stayed, sometimes for years, in inquisitorial prisons where they had time to mature their strategy and to learn from the other prisoners the main Christian prayers: they could then claim to have never forgotten them since childhood. But we can also see the obstinacy of the court to seek the truth through requests for information sent to the region of origin of the accused, and the collection of numerous testimonies. Besides, in the ports of Sicily or Sardinia, one easily found men who had been captive on the other side of the Mediterranean and who could identify the renegades: the massive nature of the capture of Christians ultimately made the anonymity of corsairs impossible. Finally, the forgiveness of the Inquisition did not mark the*happy end* of lives shattered by capture and denial. The men who were taken on the Muslim galleys were systematically sent, even after their reconciliation with the Church, to the benches of the Christian galleys, so great was the need to swell the chiourmes for the fleets of the Mediterranean.



Titian, Philip II offers Infant Ferdinand to Victory. detail: Turkish captive. Prado Museum, Madrid (Spain)

Beyond the fascination of the life stories collected in *The Christians of Allah*, it is necessary to underline the contributions of the book for the political history of religious conversions. Captives or free men, the renegades studied here carried out "instrumental" conversions (to use the terminology of Stefano Allievi): the change of religion was ordered to obtain benefits ranging from simple survival to various improvements (possibility of exit of the servile condition, marriage) and of the possibilities of new social ascent (access to the dominant group of "raïs", the corsair captains). This change could lead to a more

internalized membership, but we can also see the strength of the rooted identity of Christians. Apostasy was not the norm, the majority of captives remained attached to their Christian affiliation. The idea, advanced by B. and L. Bennassar, of a deliberate capture, by the Moslems, of the alive forces of the Christian countries through the forced conversion of the young people draws the attention, but it must be linked, as they do, to the opening of the corsair societies as to that of Ottoman society and their capacity for integration: the social elites of the Ottoman Empire were made up of converts - until the middle of the 17th century - a phenomenon without equivalent in Christian countries. For neo-Muslims, belonging to Islam took precedence over regional origins, without completely erasing them. On the other hand, discrimination was exerted against the local Muslim populations, who remained kept apart from the dominant group. but it must be linked, as they do, to the opening of privateer societies as to that of Ottoman society and to their capacities for integration: the social elites of the Ottoman Empire were made up of converts - and this until in the middle of the 17th century - phenomenon without equivalent in Christian countries. For neo-Muslims, belonging to Islam took precedence over regional origins, without completely erasing them. On the other hand, discrimination was exerted against the local Muslim populations, who remained kept apart from the dominant group. but it must be linked, as they do, to the opening of privateer societies as to that of Ottoman society and to their capacities for integration: the social elites of the Ottoman Empire were made up of converts - and this until in the middle of the 17th century - phenomenon without equivalent in Christian countries. For neo-Muslims, belonging to Islam took precedence over regional origins, without completely erasing them. On the other hand, discrimination was exerted against the local Muslim populations, who remained kept apart from the dominant group. the social elites of the ottoman empire were made up of converts - until the middle of the 17th century - a phenomenon unparalleled in christian countries. For neo-Muslims, belonging to Islam took precedence over regional origins, without completely erasing them. On the other hand, discrimination was exerted against the local Muslim populations, who remained kept apart from the dominant group. the social elites of the ottoman empire were made up of converts - until the middle of the 17th century - a phenomenon unparalleled in christian countries. For neo-Muslims, belonging to Islam took precedence over regional origins, without completely erasing them. On the other hand, discrimination was exerted against the local Muslim populations, who remained kept apart from the dominant group.

Finally, the young age of the "renegades" may suggest a comparison with the current trend of conversions to Islam in European countries, which affect young people in a specific way. But the differences in context make comparison difficult, in particular the opening of the religious market in democratic states, the existence of new means of indoctrination and the situation of identity crisis. In my opinion, this would be more relevant with the forced conversions currently carried out, outside Europe, in the areas where there are radical groups, and where the targeting of young people seems systematic.

To cite this article: Isabelle Poutrin, “Les Chrétiens d'Allah. The extraordinary history of the renegades, 16th-17th century ”, *Conversion / Power and religion*, March 1, 2016.

Online: http://pocram.hypotheses.org/1148

[1] Bennassar, Bartolomé and Lucile, *The Christians of Allah. The extraordinary history of the renegades, 16th-17th centuries* , Paris, Perrin, 1989, p. 27-39.

[2] International conference "Reporting conversions to Islam. Towards which approaches in social sciences? ", Sciences Po, OSC - CEVIPOF, Paris, February 15-16, 2016. I thank the organizers Amélie Puzenat, Juliette Galonnier and Hamzi Khateb, for their welcome. URL: http://conversion2016.sciencesconf.org/

[3] On current conversions to Islam, see: Stefano Allievi, *Les converts à l'islam: les jeunes musliques d'Europe* , Paris, L'Harmattan, 1999; Amélie Puzenat, *Conversions à l'islam: unions et separations* , Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015; Loïc Le Pape, *Another faith? Conversion routes in France: Jews, Christians, Muslims* , Aix-en-Provence, Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2015.

[4] Works whose census would exceed the limits of this report. The subject of the renegades partly overlaps with that of slavery in the Mediterranean, one of the pioneers of which was Claude Larquié (see in particular his article "The redemption of Christians in the land of Islam in the 17th century (1660-1665)", *Journal of diplomatic history* , October-December 1980, pp. 297-351. On this subject, which is currently widely studied, see Wolfgang Kaiser (dir.), *The Trade in Captives: Intermediaries in the Exchange and Redemption of Prisoners in the Mediterranean* , *XV-XVIIth century* , Rome, French School of Rome, 2008; and the file *Captives and captivities in the Mediterranean in modern times* , *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* , 87, 2013, URL: http://cdlm.revues.org/7134

[5] *The Christians of Allah*, chapter “A European history”, p. 148-201. The authors identified 459 Spanish renegades and 402 Italians.

[6] *Idem* , chapter "The ways of Islam", p. 202-266.

[7] *Idem* , p. 262-265.

[8] *Idem* , p. 289-307.

[9] On “renegade” women, we can read in particular: Éric Dursteler , *Renagade Women: gender, Identity and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean* , Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

[10] *Idem* , chapter "The rule and the exception", p. 267.

[11] *Idem* , p. 284.

[12] *Idem* , p. 267.

[13] Idem, p. 165-177.

[14] Idem, chapter "Conversions or denials", p. 308-340, with the simplified diagram, p. 325.

[15] This development will be compared to the examples given in this research notebook for medieval Spain (http://pocram.hypotheses.org/302) and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century (http: // pocram. hypotheses.org/818).

[16] Other examples in *The Christians of Allah, op. cit.* , p. 311-312.

[17] *Idem* , p. 314.

[18] *Idem* , p. 332.

[19] *Idem* , p. 333.

[20] *Idem* , p. 251.

[21] See on this subject the work of Anita González-Raymond, *La Croix et le croissant. The inquisitors of the islands facing Islam, 1550-1700* , Paris, CNRS editions, 1992.

[22] On this point, see Isabelle Poutrin, “L'Église et les consachachachés. Violence and fear in baptism and apostasy (Spain, XVI-XVII centuries ”, *Rivista di Storia del Cristianismo*, 2010/2, p.489-508.

[23] *The Christians of Allah, op. cit.* , p. 335.

[24] Idem, p. 419.

[25] *Idem* , p. 427.

[26] *Idem* , p 429.

[27] *Idem* , p. 436.

Isabelle Poutrin



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The major limitation of the Bennasser book is that the statistics are not representative of the renegade population at large. Only those renegades who desired to repatriate to Spain, Portugal, and Venice are used. All three are Roman Catholic governments. The fact that it was well-known that, in order to repatriate, a person had to say certain things like 'the conversion was obtained under threat of violence or death' or that the conversion was 'false and they had always considered themselves to be Catholic' and, since there was little documentation of when any conversion occurred, they knew that stating the conversion occurred 'less than a year, or three years,' ago helped the process move along. The following limits are characteristic of the population sample used:

Only those who had to repatriate before the Inquisition are included.

Protestants who wanted to repatriate are not represented.

Renegades who did not want to repatriate are not included.

People who never converted but lived and worked as a corsair are not included.

The sample was less than 0.5% of the population according to the authors; in reality this estimate is probably overestimated to a great degree; a more realistic figure is 0.01%; both figures are too small to make any valid conclusions.